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Amytriptyline

Introduction

Amitriptyline is the most useful in a class of drugs known as tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs). These drugs can be lethal if taken in a certain way.

The TCAs date back to the early 1960s where they established themselves as useful antidepressants. However, their narrow therapeutic margin (the dose needed for therapy as an antidepressant and that which is toxic is close) meant that there were dangers in prescribing these drugs, especially to depressed people, from either accidental or intentional overdose.

Their implication in a large number of deaths from overdose meant that other classes of safer antidepressants such as the serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRI) like fluoxetine (Prozac) found favour and largely displaced the TCAs.

Since this time the TCAs have undergone something of a resurgence for the treatment of intractable neuropathic pain (such as trigeminal neuralgia) and migraine.

Amitriptyline

Using Tricyclics for a Peaceful Death

The drugs have several characteristics that make them useful as reliable and lethal drugs. In particular they exhibit cardiotoxic and central nervous system (CNS) effects. CNS symptoms include sedation and coma, but it is the cardiotoxic effects that reduce cardiac output, lower blood pressure and disrupt cardiac rhythm that bring about death.

The toxic effects are accentuated if the drug is rapidly absorbed from the gut and this occurs in the alkaline environment of the small intestine. Preparation as a drink facilitates this, as does the use of an anti-emetic like metoclopramide (Maxolon) which speeds gastric emptying.



Fig 12.1 The tricyclic antidepressant amitriptyline

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Amitriptyline is one of the most sedating of the TCAs and particularly useful as a lethal drug. The drug is marketed as Endep or Elavil tablets. The amount required is 8gm.

Preparation of Amitriptyline

The drug is usually packaged as tablets in 10, 25, 50 or 100mg amounts (Fig 12.1) and is usually supplied in packets of 50 tablets. Two packets of 100mg tablets is (100 x 100mg) or 10gm of the drug.

For a peaceful death, open the blister packs and place 200 of the 50mg tablets in a glass. Add enough water to cover the drug and with gently agitation allow the drug to dissolve.



Fig 12.2 Amitriptyline with metoclopramide, oxazepam and Gin

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Take 6 x 10mg metoclopramide tablets and wait 40 minutes before drinking the dissolved amitriptyline. Follow this with 10 or more benzodiazepine sleeping tablets, then finish by taking alcohol to potentiate the action of the drug, and take away the bitter drug after-taste.

Note: Although amitriptyline is a strong sedative and sleep will quickly result, it is common to include a benzodiazepine sleeping drug after taking the amitriptyline and before the whisky. Serapax (oxazepam) is useful. A full card (20 x 30mg tablets) can be crushed, mixed with water and taken as a drink after the amitriptyline.

Once the drink has been consumed, settle back and take the alcohol. The drug cocktail will work quickly inducing sleep in about 15 minutes. Sleep will then deepen as consciousness is lost and the cardiotoxic properties of the drug bring about death. This period can vary and it is a good idea to have prepared a situation where there is no likelihood of disturbance for a period of up to 24 hours. (Fig 12.2 & Video)

Legal comment

The penalty for importing Amitriptyline into Australia ranges from 12 months to five years imprisonment and a fine of up to \$720,000 depending on whether there is a risk of harm if used.

In the UK, Amitriptyline is not listed as a controlled drug and can be legally imported in no more than a 3 month's supply, as long as it is for personal use only.

Drug Options - Amitriptyline

In the US, there are some strict requirements that allow medications to be imported for personal use. If these don't apply then there is the potential for a penalty of up to one year's imprisonment and a \$1,000 fine to be imposed. Although, in saying that, so long as the supply is a small amount for personal use then US Customs officers seem to allow the medication to be imported.

How does Amitriptyline score on the RP test?

Reports of failure using this regime are rare, and it rates 8/10 for Reliability. The time before sleep occurs is longer than with the barbiturates and this can cause anxiety. Peacefulness (7/10).

In the minor categories: Availability 3/5. It can sometimes be a difficult drug to acquire. Preparation is more complicated than with other ingestibles (Pr=3/5). The drug is undetectable - unless there is an autopsy.

There is nothing about the death that suggests the use of this drug - the person looks as though they have died of a cardiac arrest (which they have - D=3/5).

The process is however slow (Sp=2/5) and the drug has a moderate shelf life (St=3/5). The drug presents no risk to others (Sa=5/5).

Total 34 or 68%

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RP Test for Amitriptyline

Criteria	Score
<i>Reliability</i>	8/10
<i>Peacefulness</i>	7/10
<i>Availability</i>	3/5
<i>Preparation</i>	3/5
<i>Undetectability</i>	3/5
<i>Speed</i>	2/5
<i>Safety</i>	5/5
<i>Storage</i>	3/5
Total	34 (68%)